

THE
EARL OF BEACONSFIELD
AND THE
CONSERVATIVE REFORM BILL
OF 1867.

A LECTURE,

Delivered at the Cambridge Reform Club, on Monday,
November 13, 1870, by

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PRECEDED BY A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR FROM

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CAMBRIDGE,

December 7, 1876.

I issue the following lecture as a pamphlet in compliance with the advice of several valued friends. One of them, whose Parliamentary reputation commands a wide influence, sent me the subjoined letter, which I have obtained his permission to make public.

S. T.

“MY DEAR TAYLOR,

I have just been reading your lecture with very great interest. I hope you will publish it in such a form that it can be easily circulated and widely read.

The subject is one that ought not to be forgotten, and it is of especial interest at the present time, when the question of the further extension of the suffrage is again coming into prominence, and when, therefore, it is of great importance to remember how Reform has been treated by many of those who now direct the Government of the country.

Sincerely yours,

HENRY FAWCETT.’

“SEDLEY TAYLOR, ESQ.”

THE EARL OF BEACONSFIELD AND THE CONSERVATIVE REFORM BILL OF 1867.

GENTLEMEN,—Nothing is so politically instructive for Englishmen as the continuous study of the debates in Parliament which have led to the passing of great legislative measures. Nor is it easy to devise a fairer test wherewith to try the statesmanship of the responsible minister in charge of such a measure than the way in which he introduces it to Parliament, defends its essential principles on the second reading, and pilots it through the reefs and quicksands of the committee. A Reform Bill, touching as it does the very spring-head of political power, is necessarily one of the most momentous undertakings on which Parliament can embark, and is therefore certain, before it becomes law, to receive an amount of searching discussion proportionate to the vast interests which it involves. We may safely assume that the minister under whose auspices such a measure is carried will have a magnificent opportunity, and will receive a most urgent summons, to put forth the very highest powers of his statesmanship. Contemporaries and posterity are therefore abundantly justified in allowing the judgment they form of the political character of a minister who has passed through such an ordeal to be predominantly influenced by the manner in which he has stood the test. These remarks sufficiently indicate my object in bringing before your notice this evening the most important incidents which marked the debates on the Reform Bill of 1867, with special reference to the conduct of Mr. Disraeli. The members of the Cambridge Reform Club will hardly require of me any apology for asking their attention to a most important branch of the great subject which is embodied in the name of their club. Were they to do so, it would be natural to dwell on the facility with which facts too old for current periodical literature, and too young for systematic history, are forgotten, or on the fact that a generation of members of the club is growing up which knows the Reform Act of 1867 only by the vaguest hearsay. In either case—whether old memories are to be revived, or interest is to be for the first time aroused—my attempt will be sure of your indulgent attention.

I shall not attempt anything like a history of the debates on the Bill, but, limiting myself to those in the House of Commons up to the third reading, shall merely sketch in outline their most striking incidents, dwelling more particularly on those which throw the clearest light upon the political character of Mr. Disraeli. I hope no one present will suppose that in employing the designation of the Minister as a member of the House of Commons, rather than his title as a peer of the realm, I intend any personal disrespect. On the contrary, I give him what I regard as the more honourable style of the two—that by which he will be known on the page of English history. The only other prefatory remark which I need make is that the frequent citations of words spoken in Parliament which will occur in the sequel are, without exception, taken from the only official source for such information, “Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates.”

In July, 1866, on the resignation of Lord Russell’s Government, the Earl of Derby, father of the present Foreign Secretary, assumed office with a Cabinet very similar to that now in power. Mr. Disraeli was Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Carnarvon Colonial Secretary, Viscount Cranbourne (now Marquis of Salisbury) Secretary for India, Lord Stanley (now Earl of Derby) Foreign Secretary, Sir Stafford Northcote President of the Board of Trade, and Mr. Gathorne Hardy President of the Poor Law Board. The Government were in a minority in the House of Commons, having only succeeded in ousting their predecessors from office by the temporary help of a knot of discontented Liberals, on whose general support they could not count. At the opening of the Session of 1867, the Queen’s Speech contained this paragraph: “Your attention will again be called to the state of the representation of the people in Parliament, and I trust that your deliberations, conducted in a spirit of moderation and mutual forbearance, may lead to the adoption of measures which, without unduly disturbing the balance of political power, shall freely extend the elective franchise.” These phrases, very unusual in royal speeches, in which the Sovereign was made to prescribe to Parliament the temper in which it was to carry on its business, received their interpretation on February 11, when Mr. Disraeli, after moving that the paragraph which I have just quoted should be read by the clerk at the table, proceeded to explain the meaning which the Cabinet intended to convey by it. It was this—that in their opinion “Parliamentary Reform should be no longer a question which should decide the fate of ministries;” in other words, that the Administration to which they belonged ought to be exempted from liability to be driven from office by an adverse vote on the question of Parliamentary reform—a liability which all previous Govern-

ments had accepted as a matter of course. Now, was there anything in the immediate antecedents of those who made this proposal to justify a claim so unusual? On the contrary, they had attained office by defeating the previous Government on Parliamentary Reform, and yet here they are, but a few months later, asking to be secured against extrusion from office on that very question. Such conduct may be likened to that of a cricketing eleven, who, after having got the other side out, should propose that before they go to the wickets the rules of the game should be altered in their favour, so that balls which hit the middle stump should not count. I cannot believe that any really English statesman who had imbibed in the playground of some decently-conducted school the least notion of fair play, could have ever brought himself to put forward a proposal so preposterously, so ludicrously, unfair as that now made in the name of Lord Derby's Cabinet. But let us see how the object of keeping the Government in office was to be compassed. This Mr. Disraeli went on to explain. He intended to propose to the House of Commons a series of abstract Resolutions on the subject of Parliamentary Reform, in order to ascertain from the course which the discussion upon them took, what kind of Bill he might afterwards bring forward which would be likely to pass with ease. It is clear that Mr. Disraeli from the first perceived the view which would inevitably be taken of this remarkable proposal, and sought to meet it with a bold denial. "Do not let the House suppose," he said, "that we are angling for a policy; we are not angling for a policy." Unfortunately, however, the process of angling for a policy could not be more exactly defined than by the terms which described the plan of the Government. Mr. Disraeli's disclaimer is therefore worth no more than that of the would-be fine gentleman in Molière's comedy, who tried to get over the fact of his father having been a haberdasher by saying he never had been one; only, being a very obliging man and very knowing in stuffs, he used to have them sent to him from all parts of the world and "give them to his friends for money." Now, just as to "give a thing away for money" is only an ingenious way of saying to "sell" it, so to "elicit the opinions of Parliament in order to found a Bill upon them," is only a roundabout phrase for to "angle for a policy." In pressing the House to submit to this novel pulse-feeling process, Mr. Disraeli adopted a fulsome subserviency of tone fortunately but seldom heard from an English minister, and of which the possession of a good Parliamentary majority seems since to have completely cured him. "If," he said, "the House deigns to co-operate with us and come into council with us, many suggestions of great value will be made. Those suggestions will be received not

merely with candour, but if found to deserve the acceptance of the House and appear for the public advantage they will be accepted with gratitude." All this polite attention to an Opposition known to be in a majority reminds me irresistibly of an absurd advertisement I saw last summer in a German newspaper, which, with your permission, I will read: "A young engaged couple, of extremely respectable family, agreeable appearance, polite manners, and cheerful disposition, but who do not possess the means of marrying, offer to a well-to-do elderly gentleman the opportunity, by furnishing the needful funds, of regarding himself as their family connection. Prepaid offers to be addressed to the editor of this journal." Let us slightly vary the terms of this engaging offer: "A young Conservative Cabinet, of aristocratic composition, imposing aspect, courteous demeanour, and buoyant disposition, but which does not possess a Parliamentary majority, offers to influential members of the House of Commons who will guarantee it against loss of office on Parliamentary Reform, the opportunity of considering themselves inscribed in its good books. Apply to the Conservative Whip."

Had Mr. Disraeli's programme, announced on February 11, been carried out, the proceedings on the Reform question would have commenced with the discussion of a string of Resolutions, which were placed on the table of the House on the following day. These were for the most part extremely general and vaguely expressed propositions, such as, *e.g.*, that the number of electors in counties and boroughs ought to be increased; that it was desirable to add to house franchises other franchises of a different character; that the principle of plurality of votes might be advantageously adopted, and so forth. A fortnight had been allowed to members to consider the Resolutions, and on February 25 the House met for their discussion. Forthwith the Conservative leader executed one of those instantaneous and unexpected transformations of which we shall see a good many before we separate this evening. The House had been told by him that the object of the Government in bringing forward Resolutions was to obtain such an expression of its opinion as would enable a Bill to be brought in which would pass with promptitude. This language clearly implied that the discussion of the Resolutions was to precede the introduction of a Bill. To the surprise of his hearers, however, Mr. Disraeli went on to sketch the outlines of a Bill including a £6 rating franchise in boroughs, a £20 occupation franchise in counties, and various other provisions. This Bill, he said, it would be the duty of the Government on the passing of the Resolutions to introduce; it was a "sincere Bill" which they were prepared to carry. The House was now placed in a position of difficulty, into

which it was anything but creditable to Mr. Disraeli's statesmanship to have brought it. To discuss vague general propositions, with precise and definite proposals known to underlie them, was perfectly futile, yet this was what Mr. Disraeli's course manifestly required. For instance, what was the good of debating Resolution I., that the number of electors ought to be increased, when it was known that the Government proposed a definite reduction of the borough franchise from £10 to £6? Other provisions of the Government measure which had been mentioned rendered equally valueless the second, third, and fourth Resolutions. This objection was forcibly stated in the ensuing debate by Mr. Lowe. The same speaker dwelt with great effect on a still more objectionable feature of Mr. Disraeli's plan—his attempt to shift the responsibility of initiation from its proper place on the shoulders of the Government upon those of the House of Commons. Why, he asked, should the Government be relieved of the liability to be driven from office on the question of Parliamentary Reform which other Governments had always accepted? "Why should they have the mark of Cain put on them, so that no man should kill them?" It was the business of the House to decide on the acts of the executive, not to undertake its responsibility. "Let us," concluded Mr. Lowe, "call upon the Government to withdraw their Resolutions, to introduce a Bill, and to bring the matter to an issue fairly and plainly in the old English fashion, and deal with it in our own down-right way" Mr. Bright spoke to the same effect. He said it was merely a loss of time to go into a discussion on the Resolutions, and compared Mr. Disraeli's tentative proposals to a shopman asking across the counter whether there is "anything more, gentlemen, you would like?" Mr. Disraeli, moved, no doubt, by these and other like criticisms, spoke in a very half-hearted tone of "meeting the wishes of the House," and "considering whether there were not some among the Resolutions that need not be brought before the House." His remarks were received with ominous cries of "Withdraw, withdraw!" and he was curtly told by Mr. Roebuck that his "tentative process of ascertaining what would pass the House in order that he might bring in a safe Bill, would do no honour to himself, and, if acquiesced in, no honour to the House." The very next evening Mr. Disraeli had to submit to the humiliation of withdrawing every one of his Resolutions, a course which his colleague, Mr. Walpole, then Home Secretary, had declared in the House the night before would be an "utter mistake" for the Government to adopt. He attempted to some degree to break his fall by implying, amidst loud murmurs, that the leader of the Opposition had "seemed to enter into an engagement" that the second reading of

the Bill which he promised to introduce would not be opposed—a statement which Mr. Gladstone at once energetically disavowed. This incident may be considered as the close of the first scene in our drama. The curtain falls on thirteen discarded Resolutions, the chief actor announcing that he will reappear as soon as the necessary scene-shifting can be effected. Unfortunately, on the curtain being again raised, the audience had to listen to a lugubrious statement from the manager that three of the principal actors had declined to go on with the piece, and quitted his company. That under these distressing circumstances he intended to shut up the theatre until he had reconstructed his company, when he should bring out his national drama, “The Reform Bill,” in a revised form, and with a new cast. This was the gist of a speech delivered in Parliament on March 4, to which, dropping our theatrical metaphor, we will now revert. On that day the Prime Minister, Lord Derby, made a statement in the House of Lords, to which I ask your best attention. He began by explaining the object which the Government had had in view when they decided to proceed by Resolutions on Parliamentary Reform, viz., “to elicit from the House of Commons the views they took upon the main questions which would necessarily be involved in any Reform Bill.” “I admit,” said the Premier, “that the Resolutions were somewhat vaguely and indistinctly drawn; our object was not to pledge the Government to a specific point upon any of those Resolutions, but to obtain the general opinion of the House of Commons as to what measures would be likely to meet with a general assent. The House of Commons having evidently shown its disinclination to proceed by Resolution, Her Majesty’s Government did not hesitate, notwithstanding the great disadvantage under which they now laboured, to undertake to bring forward a measure.” Now what, let me ask, was this “great disadvantage” under which Lord Derby’s Government was now labouring? Why, palpably this, that they had no policy of their own on Parliamentary Reform, and had intended to fish one up in the House of Commons; but, being thrown out of their schemes by the recalcitrancy of the House, found themselves under the awkward necessity of having to manufacture a policy at a very short notice. Their “disadvantage” was, in short, that of a poacher who, after promising his wife a fine trout out of his neighbour’s stream, has been warned off by the proprietor, and does not know where to find the fish which he had depended on his rod and line to secure. This is as good as admitted in the next paragraph of Lord Derby’s speech, which states that up to the withdrawal of the Resolutions, the Government had not actually “framed a Bill.” Two schemes had been under their consideration, “varying from each other

in that very essential particular—the amount of the extension of the franchise.” The measure which Mr. Disraeli had explained to the House of Commons, which was the less extensive of the two schemes, had been accepted by the majority of the Cabinet, in deference to the opinions of three of their colleagues, but as it was now obvious that their proposal had not been favourably received “on either side of the House” (of Commons), “the Government had decided to abandon” the proposition they had at first brought forward, and “recur to that which commanded the support of the great majority in it, though at the cost of sacrificing three most esteemed and valuable colleagues.” These three were Lord Cranbourne, Secretary of State for India, General Peel, Minister of War, and Lord Carnarvon, Colonial Secretary. On the same evening Mr. Disraeli made a short statement to the same effect in the House of Commons. The Bill, of which he had explained the provisions on February 25, was thrown overboard, and a new one, establishing the Borough Franchise, “upon a sure, extensive, and permanent basis,” promised at the end of a fortnight. On the following evening, March 5, Mr. Disraeli endeavoured to account for the precipitate haste with which the Government had abandoned their first proposals. Lord Derby, as we just saw, told the House of Lords that the Bill had been ill received on both sides of the Lower House. This, however, was by no means an accurate account of the matter. The Bill was never printed; it never reached the hands of members, and it cannot, therefore be properly said to have been discussed at all. Hardly any expression of opinion had followed Mr. Disraeli’s statement of its contents. Under these circumstances, some further explanation seemed called for, and the following was the mode in which Mr. Disraeli endeavoured to supply it. He told the House of Commons that at a private meeting of Mr. Gladstone’s supporters they had come to the conclusion that “no settlement could be satisfactory unless it were based on £5 rating.” This statement being received with cries of “No, no,” from the Opposition, Mr. Disraeli continued thus: “That, at all events, was the information which reached us. Probably, it was not accurate, and much of the information which reaches you about us is equally unauthentic.” Hereupon, Mr. Gladstone addressed the following explanation to the House: “The right hon. gentleman says that if he has received inaccurate information, we also are subject to the like misfortune. That may be so, but the difference is this—we do not found our statements in Parliament upon it, nor do we, upon inaccurate information, base decisions of vital consequence in matters of public policy. At the meeting referred to,” continued Mr. Gladstone, “no resolution about

£5 rating was come to, and the subject was not even discussed, hardly even referred to. He would put it to the House whether the right honourable gentleman was justified in attempting to fasten on the Opposition the responsibility of the failure of his scheme."

A fortnight now elapsed, and on March 18 Mr. Disraeli introduced the second Bill which was to make good the calamitous failure of its abortive predecessor. In the exordium of his speech he made a gratuitous attack on the Liberal Bill of 1866, which can be instantly rebutted out of his own mouth. That measure proposed to lower the borough franchise to £7. This proposal, Mr. Disraeli said was avowedly founded on expediency and involved no principle. Mr. Gladstone had thought it necessary there should be an admission of the working-classes, and suggested an arbitrary line for admitting as many as he thought proper. Now let us see in what terms Mr. Disraeli had himself described the qualification fixed by the Reform Act of 1832 at £10, a figure just as arbitrary as that proposed in 1866 by Mr. Gladstone. "The £10 qualification," said Mr. Disraeli, speaking on February 28, 1859, "is a test which affords a fair presumption that the holder possesses those qualities which entitle him to perform the acts of citizenship. It is therefore founded upon a principle, and the objection against it appears to me to be a sophism." Now it was precisely on this ground of electoral fitness that Mr. Gladstone proposed the £7 franchise; but Mr. Disraeli was now in opposition, and so it suited his purpose to say that a test which he had described in 1859 as founded on a principle was, when brought forward in 1866, founded on expediency and involved no principle. Can we ask for a better proof that in the mouth of Mr. Disraeli "principle" and "expediency" mean only one and the same thing? Let us see, however, what was the great principle on which, as opposed to the no-principle of a fixed pecuniary limit, Mr. Disraeli was prepared to found himself. Every householder who had been rated to the relief of the poor for two years, and had paid his rates, was to have the franchise in a borough. It is easy for me to repeat and for you to hear this proposal as if there were nothing very remarkable about it; but coming at the time it did, and from the leader of the Tory party, it involved the most astounding change of front which could well be imagined. In order to make good this statement, I propose to shew that during a series of previous years Mr. Disraeli had both by the line of policy which he followed, whether in office or in opposition, and also in explicit declarations repeatedly made, pledged himself against any considerable lowering of the borough franchise. It will suffice for this purpose if we begin our retrospect at the year 1859, when Mr. Disraeli brought in the unsuccessful Reform Bill of Lord Derby's Government. Its main provision was to extend the £10 household franchise to the counties. Collateral franchises of various kinds were proposed, but no lowering of the old £10 qualification in boroughs. Lord John Russell, on the second reading, moved an amendment asserting the necessity of a greater extension of the franchise in boroughs than that contemplated in the Government measure. To this amendment Mr. Disraeli offered the most

determined resistance, and declared himself opposed to any lowering of the borough qualification. He said: "I cannot look upon what is called reduction of the franchise in boroughs but with alarm; and I have never yet met with any argument which fairly encounters the objections that are urged to it. You cannot encounter it by sentimental assertions of the good qualities of the working classes. The greater their good qualities the greater the danger. . . . If you dwell on their intelligence you only increase the power they will exercise." Lord John Russell's amendment was carried, and the Tory Government, after a fruitless appeal to the constituencies, resigned office. The next year, 1860, saw a Whig Reform Bill brought forward by the Government of Lord Palmerston. It proposed to reduce the borough qualification to a £6 rental. Mr. Disraeli opposed the Bill, on the ground that the reduction suggested would establish a predominance of the working classes unless it were accompanied by collateral franchises like those contained in the Bill of the previous year. The sentences in which Mr. Disraeli spoke of these franchises afford such a capital illustration of his double-edged wit that I must quote them, though they do not bear directly on our present subject. "They had been called," he said, "'fancy franchises,' and that was considered an answer. Alliteration tickles the ear, and is a very popular form of language among savages. It is, I believe, the characteristic of rude and barbarous poetry, but it is not an argument in legislation." This from the man who afterwards invented the phrase "plundering and blundering" to discredit Mr. Gladstone's Administration, well knowing the effect which this jingling alliteration would have on the presumably "savage" and "barbarous" persons to whom it was addressed. On May 3, 1865, Mr. Baines moved the second reading of a Bill to reduce the borough qualification from £10 to £6, and stated that the measure was avowedly intended to bring in a considerable portion of the working classes. During the second night of the ensuing debate Mr. Disraeli made certain declarations which are important from the unmistakable language in which they are couched. He spoke as follows: "All that has occurred—all that I have observed—all the results of my reflection lead me to this more and more—that the principle upon which the constituencies of this country should be increased is one not of radical, but I would say lateral reform—the extension of the franchise, not its degradation." The speaker here refers to franchises not depending on a house qualification, as is obvious from what follows: "Although we did (in 1859) to a certain extent agree to some modification of the £10 franchise, yet I confess that my present opinion is opposed, as it originally was, to any change of the kind. I think it would fail in its object—that it would not secure the introduction of that particular class we all desire to see introduced, but that it would introduce many who are unworthy of the franchise." On April 27, 1866, Mr. Disraeli spoke thus: "Though impartial and intelligent people are desirous that the choicest members of the working classes should form a part—and no unimportant portion—of the estate of the Commons, they recoil from and reject a gross and indiscriminate reduction of the franchise. That, I believe, is the

real opinion of the country." I have now produced instances spread over the period 1859 up to the eve of the Reform Bill of 1867, in which the leader of the Tory Party in the House of Commons had declared himself against any considerable reduction of the borough franchise below the £10 limit fixed by the Act of 1832. Mr. Disraeli's colleagues, too, had made equally explicit declarations of the same policy. I will refer only to three of these. On April 20, 1866, Mr. Gathorne Hardy expressed the following opinion on Mr. Gladstone's Bill: "With regard to the suffrage in the boroughs, I object to a uniform lowering of the franchise to £7 throughout the country, in the manner proposed by this Bill. . . . It will give to the working classes who have now an enormous influence beyond their own body, and especially over the small shopkeepers, an undue preponderance of political power." On May 30, 1866, Sir Stafford Northcote said "he was obliged, with the utmost sharpness and definiteness, to say that he thought to descend to household suffrage, with any safeguards whatever, would be a most mischievous and reckless innovation on the Constitution. Upon that ground he opposed, and should always do so, any general lowering of the franchise below the present limit of £10." On March 5, 1867, Lord Stanley, the present Earl of Derby, of whom we have lately heard so much, said: "The right hon. gentlemen (Messrs. Lowe and Horsman) have spoken as if it were the intention of those who sit upon these benches to go in a more democratic direction than even gentlemen opposite would be inclined to take, and to bring in a Bill which would reduce the franchise to an almost unlimited extent. I say plainly and frankly that I can conceive no circumstances which would render the adoption of such a course by us in our position, and with our antecedents, either expedient or honourable, and certainly we shall not follow it." In less than one year after the declarations of Mr. Gathorne Hardy and Sir Stafford Northcote, in less than one fortnight after that of Lord Stanley, Mr. Disraeli openly proposed household suffrage, a measure going beyond the wishes of the moderate Liberals, but which the most decided Radicals highly approved. What at this crisis was the conduct of these right honourable gentlemen, of this noble lord? Why, as the very organ of Toryism, the *Quarterly Review*, stated at the time in so many words, they "swallowed their pledges in silence." Mr. Hardy agreed to "give to the working classes an undue preponderance of political power." Sir Stafford Northcote consented to aid in perpetrating "a most mischievous and reckless innovation on the Constitution." Lord Stanley fell in with a course the adoption of which by the Tory Government he had declared but one fortnight before would be "neither expedient nor honourable." Lord Cranbourne, who, as we have seen, took (in company with Lord Carnarvon and General Peel) the straightforward course of resigning office rather than identify himself with the new tactics of the Cabinet, pointed out to the House of Commons, in language of mortifying distinctness, the discreditable character of the whole transaction. "A Reform Bill," he said, "is a very important thing—few more so could come under our discussion; but I venture to think that political morality and the respect in which public men are

held by the people of this country are of more importance than any provisions even of a Reform Bill. I would far rather see a very bad Reform Bill passed by the hon. gentleman the member for Birmingham (Mr. Bright), than a Reform Bill inconsistent with all their traditions, with all their preceding action, with all their professions, and with all the provisions on which they have induced others to vote, passed by my right hon. friends upon these benches."

In order rightly to appreciate the grounds on which Mr. Disraeli sought to base his new proposal, it is necessary to look back for a moment at the circumstances under which he and his party succeeded in ousting Earl Russell's Administration from office in the previous year. The Bill brought in by that Government proposed to give the borough franchise to every occupier of a house the clear annual value of which did not fall below £7; and the county franchise in like manner to every £14 occupier. The measure was carried through its second reading, but only by the barest majority. In committee Mr. Ward Hunt moved that, in estimating the value of the tenement which was to confer the franchise in the counties, rating value should be substituted for net rental. The motion was rejected, but a month later an exactly similar proposal as regards boroughs was brought forward by Lord Dunkellin. It was well known that the Government would not consent to the proposed alteration, for Mr. Gladstone, in introducing the Bill, had distinctly stated that the inequalities of rating in different towns and parishes were so "gross and anomalous" that the principle of rating could not be made the basis of value-estimations for the franchise. Further, it was also well known that the leader of the Opposition had expressed the same condemnation of a rating qualification in even stronger terms. On February 28, 1859, when introducing the unsuccessful measure of that year, Mr. Disraeli said he had always been much biased in favour of a franchise based on rating instead of on value, but that, on examining the matter in detail, he found it involved in difficulties which appeared to him insurmountable. The nature of these difficulties he described in the following words:—"For the purpose of securing the advantage of having the rate-book the register you must, of course, leave perfect discretion to the overseer. The overseer has an interest in raising rates, people may say, or he may be a very hot political partisan. Are you prepared to leave to the overseer the absolute discretion of appointing those who are to exercise the franchise? Notwithstanding the Parochial Assessment Act, the rating of this country is most unequal, and it is only those whose business it has been to examine into this subject in its minute details, who can be aware of the preposterous consequences which would arise from a rating instead of a value qualification." Mr. Disraeli now thought proper to vote in favour of a rating qualification, and alleged in justification of this step that subsequent legislation had to a great extent removed the inequalities of rating which had caused him to declare against it as a basis for the franchise in 1859. Lord Dunkellin's amendment tying down the Government to a rating qualification, was carried against them. In announcing the consequent abandonment of the mea-

sure and resignation of the Government, Mr. Gladstone gave a few figures which shewed that the inequalities of rating which Mr. Disraeli had felt so strongly in 1859 were still quite insurmountable. In order, he said, to enfranchise by a rating qualification, not less than the same number who would be brought on the register by an occupation franchise of £7, it would in some boroughs be necessary to go as high as £6 rateable value, in others below £4. Further, different scales of rating would have to be established in one and the same borough, owing to the differences of rating frequently prevailing in different parts of the same town which happened to be in different unions.

The decision came to by the House of Commons on this amendment of Lord Dunkellin's was made by Mr. Disraeli the starting point for a very remarkable enterprise. He discovered what no one had previously had the least idea of, viz., that in preferring rating to rental value as the basis of estimation for the franchise in boroughs, the House of Commons had laid down a great constitutional principle. On Lord Dunkellin's amendment "a great decision was arrived at by the unerring instinct of the House," to wit, that to be rated to the relief of the poor and to pay the rate was henceforth to be the condition of possessing the borough franchise. "I take it for granted," he continued, "that if ever there was a decision of the House of Commons which meant something, it was that decision which determined the fate of the Ministry: and if anything ever had the character of authority in this House at all, it was the vote arrived at on that occasion. . . . I take it that that vote of the House of Commons meant this:—If you are going to invest men with the exercise of public rights, let that great trust be accompanied with the exercise of public duty. We believe that a *bona fide* rating franchise is what the House of Commons meant by the resolution it adopted." It is sufficient, I think, to refer to a few notorious facts, in order to see that no such inference as that embodied in these words could be legitimately drawn from the adoption by the House of Commons of Lord Dunkellin's amendment. In the first place, that decision in favour of rating as against rental in boroughs was arrived at only by a bare majority of eleven votes in a House of six hundred and nineteen members, and, moreover, was almost exactly counterbalanced by an opposite decision in favour of rental against rating in counties, adopted a month earlier in a House of five hundred and fifty three members by a majority of seven votes. These circumstances alone suffice to deprive both determinations of any "character of authority" whatever. But further, on reference to the debate on Lord Dunkellin's amendment, it becomes evident that the principle of personal assessment to and personal payment of the poor rate was not before the House at all. The proposal of Lord Dunkellin was nothing more than this, that in fixing the worth of the tenement which was to confer the franchise, the estimate made by the parochial authorities for the purpose of assessing the poor rate should be employed in preference to the amount of rent paid for the qualifying building. It is true that Lord Dunkellin, in his opening speech, did recommend the principle of attaching the franchise to the payment of rates; but Mr. Gladstone at once pointed out

that no such proposal was contained in the terms of the resolution before the House. "Let it be understood," he said, "that we have nothing to do now with determining whether the man himself shall be rated or not, or shall have paid his rates, and that those two questions are reserved for some future period. The question now is whether the value of the occupation in right of which he is to vote is to be calculated upon the column of rateable value." Accordingly, the question of rateable value as against rental value was the topic discussed throughout the debate, only two speakers, out of nineteen who addressed the House, diverging for a moment to the irrelevant subject of personal rating and personal ratepaying. We are now prepared to appreciate the *modus operandi* of Mr. Disraeli in endeavouring to supply an authoritative basis for his proposal of a ratepaying household suffrage. He found two decisions of the House of Commons, arrived at within a month of each other, both by utterly insignificant majorities, one in favour of rating, the other in favour of rental. Arbitrarily selecting the former, he as arbitrarily chose to attribute to it a character of authority, nay more, of infallibility. "A great decision was," he said, "arrived at by the unerring instinct of the House." The next step was to pervert the decision actually arrived at into something totally different, about which not one word appears in the resolution adopted, and which had been only twice incidentally referred to in the course of the debate—viz., that henceforth the possession of the franchise was to depend upon the payment of rates. I have a shrewd suspicion that I can point out what induced Mr. Disraeli to make this singular attempt to trade on the ignorance of the House of Commons of its own decisions. Lord Dunkellin, in moving his resolution, had advocated "the principle of a rating franchise—the principle that those rated to the poor should be entitled to this privilege of citizenship." Mr. Gladstone, in reference to this statement, remarked that a good deal of Lord Dunkellin's speech tended, whether with his own consciousness or not, in the direction of household suffrage. Here was just the hint Mr. Disraeli wanted. He had merely artfully to imply that the House, in adopting the resolution of Lord Dunkellin, had given its sanction to the statements by which its mover recommended it. These statements necessarily tended to household suffrage, and, therefore, here was an authoritative decision arrived at by the unerring instinct of the House of Commons in favour of what Mr. Disraeli's exigencies required—a *bonâ fide* rating franchise. It is amusing enough to observe the almost ludicrous contradiction between the object which Lord Dunkellin had in view in bringing forward his motion and that to which Mr. Disraeli now attempted to turn it. Lord Dunkellin said it was to him one of the greatest recommendations of his proposal that "it would interpose a barrier, steady and fixed, to the descent to universal suffrage." Mr. Disraeli had the hardihood to assert that by its adoption the House of Commons had paved the way for the longest step in the direction of universal suffrage yet made in this country.

Mr. Disraeli's broad democratic proposals in reference to the borough house franchise were accompanied by others which, had they passed into law, would doubtless have exerted no inconsiderable

influence in an opposite direction. This Bill included a series of collateral or bye franchises. There was to be an educational franchise to be conferred on graduates of Universities, persons who had passed senior local examinations, ministers of religion, barristers, medical men, and certificated schoolmasters, and a pecuniary franchise for depositors of £50 in a savings bank, or in British funds, or for those who paid 20s. per annum for assessed taxes and income tax. A borough voter was allowed a vote on any one of these franchises in addition to that given by household suffrage. In the counties a £15 rating qualification conferred the suffrage; but though the bye franchises were also to be in force there, they were not to give the dual vote as in the boroughs.

The debate on the second reading threw a strong light on a highly objectionable feature of the Bill—the action of its rate-paying clauses in excluding whole sections of the community, and excluding them in the most uncertain and capricious manner. Personal assessment to the poor-rate, and personal payment of the rate so assessed, constituted the condition on which the franchise was to be given. Now, in a large proportion of cases this condition was not fulfilled, owing to the rate being assessed on and paid by the landlord. This would particularly apply to cottages let with a farm in country districts where there would be only one rating for the land, the farmhouse, and the cottages. The occupiers of such cottages would, therefore, be excluded from the franchise under the Bill. Moreover there were a number of local Acts of Parliament in force in particular boroughs under which all houses below a certain value were rated on the owner, and the same system had been introduced into many other boroughs by means of a piece of permissive legislation—the Small Tenements Act of 1850. Hence in all boroughs where either local Acts or that of 1850 were in operation, the poorer householders would not be enfranchised under the Bill. According to a computation made by Mr. Gladstone, the rate-paying conditions would exclude from the suffrage seven householders out of every eight in boroughs under local Acts, and four out of every five in those under the Small Tenements Act, while in London the Bill would produce as good as no enfranchising effect whatever. Further, inasmuch as the Small Tenements Act could at any time be brought into a parish or turned out of it again by a decision of its vestry, the effect of the proposed rate-paying franchise would necessarily be to hand over to local authorities the power of determining whether the poorer class of householders should be admitted to or excluded from the franchise. A more mischievous device for playing into the hands of electioneering vestrymen and Parliamentary registration agents could hardly be suggested.

It is not my intention to trouble you with details of the interminable discussions entailed by the rate-paying provisions of the Bill. They erected the disenfranchised tenant, whose rates were compounded for by his landlord, the “compound householder,” as he was called, into a Parliamentary nuisance of the first water. The country was deluged day after day with harangues on his hard case, and with proposals for its amelioration, until the whole subject became an unutterable bore. At last the Tory leader, who had begun

by stoutly maintaining the exclusion of the compound householder, suddenly turned completely round, and, to the astonishment of his own supporters, agreed to an amendment from the Liberal side of the House which abolished the whole system of compounding for the poor-rate. The incidents of this rapid act of tergiversation are so extraordinary that you must allow me to dwell for a few moments on the details of the transaction. On May 17 Mr. Hodgkinson moved a clause to the effect that henceforth no one other than the occupier should be rated to parochial rates in respect of premises occupied by him within the limits of any Parliamentary borough. This proposal was tantamount to the entire abolition of the compound householder and the instant enfranchisement of this class of persons who would have gained no advantage from the Bill as it originally stood. It therefore clearly involved an enormous stride in a democratic direction; the certain admission, instead of the contingent and doubtful admission, of some 500,000 persons to the franchise. Mr. Disraeli, however, after remarking that the principle embodied in Mr. Hodgkinson's motion was the policy of the Government measure, announced that he was prepared to accept the amendment, and even endeavoured to force its adoption on his supporters without giving them a reasonable time for consideration. It was only with reluctance that, on the remonstrance of Lord Cranbourne, he consented to the Chairman reporting progress. At the adjourned debate the disgust felt by consistent and honourable Conservatives found vigorous expression in the speech of Sir Rainald Knightley, an ancient ally with whom Mr. Disraeli had gladly combined in order to obstruct the proposals of the Liberal Government in the previous year. "On Tuesday," said Sir Rainald Knightley, "hon. members on the Conservative side of the House received the usual intimation from the Secretary to the Treasury, earnestly requesting their attendance, as an amendment of great importance was about to be proposed—an amendment of vital importance. He would venture to say that every gentleman who read that circular imagined that he was pressed to come down to the House for the purpose of opposing the amendment of the honourable member for Newark. He believed that was the universal feeling on his side of the House. During the discussion he retired for a short time, and on his return was perfectly astonished to hear that the Chancellor of the Exchequer had embraced the proposition of the hon. member for Newark with joy and gratitude, saying it was in perfect accordance with the conclusions at which the Government had originally arrived, and that it was also in perfect harmony with what he still had the assurance to call the principle of the Bill." There can be no doubt that the Tory party regarded, and were justified by the words and acts of their leader in regarding, the restricted enfranchisement of householders under the Bill, in its unaltered form, as the main compensating circumstance which induced them to vote for what must have been to them, on the whole, an unwelcome and even nauseous proposal. No doubt it was open to Mr. Disraeli to say that, in consenting to abandon all restrictions, he was only carrying out thoroughly the principle of his measure, just as a surgeon who, after proposing to cut off your

leg below the knee, wants to take it out at the hip joint, may say that he is only carrying out to its full extent the principle of amputation. In both cases, however, it is the result which is the important matter, and whether there were, or were not, a change of principle involved in Mr. Disraeli's tactics, there undoubtedly was an enormous change in the scale on which the principle was to be applied, and, therefore, ample ground for the charges of political inconsistency with which more than one of his supporters now assailed him.

The history of the passage of the Bill through committee presents us with incidents of only one kind; the successive abandonment by Mr. Disraeli of almost every provision of his Bill which could be regarded as of the nature of a Conservative counterpoise. I will pass briefly through the chief of these incidents, in the order of their occurrence, beginning with the provision called the dual vote, which allowed certain specified classes of persons in boroughs to vote twice—once on their household qualification, and a second time on the score of their being barristers, certificated schoolmasters, holders of £50 investments, payers of 20s. assessed taxes, or what not. This proposal was obviously too invidious and unfair to have any chance of adoption. It was vigorously condemned on both sides of the House and withdrawn even before the Bill reached its second reading. Mr. Disraeli in announcing its abandonment protested that the dual vote was not brought forward merely as a check and a counterpoise, "no such mere vulgar idea" having entered the mind of the Government. He had hoped the proposal would not have been left so utterly without support and "that some stray philosopher would have risen to say something in its behalf and to have lent dignity to our forlorn position." It is difficult to say whether the sardonic contempt which leers through these words is intended for the "stray philosopher," the "dual vote," or the Government of which Mr. Disraeli was the chief ornament. The result, however, is that a proposition seriously made in Parliament is unceremoniously pitched into the waste-paper basket, with an ugly grin of contemptuous indifference, by its responsible proposer. On May 6, Mr. McCullagh Torrens proposed a lodger franchise for the occupant of a room or rooms which would let unfurnished for £10 a year. This was, from the point of view of Mr. Torrens and of the Liberal party, a most reasonable suggestion; but how did it square with the general policy of Mr. Disraeli's measure? That policy, announced, as we have seen, with pompous reference to the constitutional principle supposed to have been laid down by the "unerring instinct" of the House of Commons, was personal assessment and payment of the poor rate. A lodger has nothing whatever to do with the rates, and therefore to admit him to the franchise was tantamount to relinquishing the much vaunted rate-paying condition, and descending from what Mr. Disraeli called principle to what Mr. Disraeli called expediency. The Conservative party had a right to expect that no such descent would be made, but they were again to learn by sad experience how little dependence was to be placed on the declarations of their leader. Mr. Disraeli said he was in favour of a lodger franchise, and promised to bring in a clause for inserting such a

franchise; whereupon Mr. Torrens, having attained his object, withdrew his amendment. On May 20 the Government consented, after being beaten by a majority of 201 to 157, to enfranchise £5 copyholders. On May 27 Mr. Disraeli made the highly unconstitutional statement that the policy before the House was "the policy of the House of Commons, not of Her Majesty's Ministers," and on pressure from Mr. Locke King he lowered the county qualification from £15 to £12. On March 28, at the bidding of Sir Roundell Palmer, he first abandoned the entire educational franchise clause without even taking a division, and then threw after it that conferring the pecuniary franchise, with no better excuse with which to cover these repeated and humiliating failures than a cynical joke on the "distinguished" and "triumphant success" with which the Government had advanced their measure through committee. A few more such successes were still in store for Mr. Disraeli and his colleagues. On June 17 Mr. Laing had proposed to give a third member to towns containing over 150,000 inhabitants. The amendment was negatived by 247 to 239, after a speech by Mr. Disraeli who said he "could not conceive" that the policy recommended by Mr. Laing would be accepted by the House. A fortnight later, when Mr. Horsfall moved a clause of almost identical purport, to give an additional member to Liverpool, to Manchester, and to Birmingham, Mr. Disraeli, after allowing two of his supporters to speak against the proposal, suddenly turned round and said he would not only accept it but would also give an additional member to Leeds. General Peel, after saying that he had voted against this proposal when it was brought forward before by Mr. Laing, and that he should vote against it then, added the following severe, but richly merited, censure:—"There are three things with respect to which my preceding opinions have been confirmed: the first is, that nothing has so slight a vitality as a 'vital point;' the second is, that there is nothing so insecure as 'securities;' and the third is, that there is nothing so elastic as the conscience of a Cabinet Minister." I resume the order of time, broken for the moment for the sake of continuity. On June 17, Mr. Disraeli made a proposal of a most singular description. The University of London had, after years of waiting and petitioning, been promised Parliamentary representation after the manner of the ancient Universities, but only to the extent of one member. A clause giving effect to this promise was contained in the present Bill. All of a sudden, Mr. Disraeli proposed, in place of this arrangement, to make a single constituency out of the University of London and the University of Durham combined. The character of these two bodies was as mutually irreconcilable as could well be imagined. The University of London was founded at a time when religious disabilities of more or less stringency repelled to a considerable extent from Oxford and Cambridge those persons who were not prepared to conform to the doctrine and worship of the Established Church. The University of Durham was called into existence under the auspices of the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral, mainly for the purpose of educating future clergymen of the Church of England. The spirit of the London graduates was essentially

non-conforming, and to a considerable extent anti-clerical. That of the Durham graduates was establishmentarian, and if not sacerdotal, at least strongly clerical. These two discordant corporations Mr. Disraeli now proposed to unite into a single constituency. I do not find in the records of the debate which ensued on this remarkable proposition that its author defended it by reasons of any kind. He did indeed perpetrate a couple of jocularities, of the type with which we have all long become familiar, saying first that "the University of London would have shown greater generosity if it had welcomed its younger brother," and next, when an honourable member had informed him that Durham was the older University, that "this was another instance of the hatred of the younger brother towards the older." Mr. Disraeli had, however, at his disposal an instrument which can be effectively employed when good arguments, and even good jokes, are not to the fore, viz., a compact body of supporters ready to vote for any proposal, however discreditable, at the command of their chief. He accordingly attempted to force his amendment through by brute force, but was met by the Opposition with alternate motions of adjournment and reporting progress, and at last compelled reluctantly to postpone his enterprise. The close of the debate was marked by an exhibition of the Tory leader's reckless hardihood of assertion. Mr. Denman, with a feeling of indignation which the proceedings of the Government fully justified, had exclaimed that "the University of London ought to have time to say whether it would not rather bide its time until Parliament came to its senses, than have the University of Durham thus tied round its neck." Mr. Disraeli made believe to regard this as an official statement, though he knew well enough it was nothing of the sort. "The hon. gentleman," he said, "appeared to speak with authority on behalf of the London University, and he understood from him that that institution withdrew its claim to Parliamentary representation." Mr. Denman, of course, at once stated, what indeed every one present was fully aware of, that he "had no authority whatever to speak for the University of London, nor any connection with it, nor had he said anything to that effect." The matter stood adjourned to the next day, and Mr. Disraeli's supporters, as they walked home, had a good opportunity of considering how far the last utterance of their leader was consistent with the usual courtesy observed among gentlemen. On the succeeding evening Mr. Disraeli resumed his attempt. He declined to postpone the clause in order to give the Convocation of the London University an opportunity of making known its wishes, and succeeded by a majority of only a single vote—226 to 225—in getting the word "University" in the singular, altered to "Universities" in the plural, to prepare for the insertion of "London and Durham" in place of "London" alone. A doughtier champion than Mr. Disraeli now came to the rescue of the distressed University. Mr. Gladstone urged the House, doubtless in those tones of genuine conviction which outweigh all the gibes and taunts producible from the storehouse of political insincerity—"not to do the most odious of all things—give that which professes to be a boon, subject to conditions which convert it, if not into an injury, yet into a

slight and a disparagement." These manly and straightforward counsels prevailed. Mr. Disraeli, on trying to insert the words, "and Durham" after "London," was beaten by 234 to 226, and his petty scheme finally collapsed. On June 20, Mr. Disraeli, for the last time, lightened his ship by throwing overboard one of the few remaining portions of its original cargo. The Bill contained a clause allowing the use of voting papers at Parliamentary elections. Mr. Torrens moved its omission. Mr. Disraeli defended the clause. "I hold," he said, "that the principle is founded upon truth and justice." Nevertheless, on the House determining, by 272 to 234, that it would have nothing to do with voting papers, Mr. Disraeli promptly saw the necessity of sacrificing truth and justice to considerations of a different order, and executing yet again that strategic movement to the rear in performing which he had by frequent practice recently attained such remarkable celerity.

I have now done with the Bill in committee, and will ask you to accompany me to the debate on the third reading. We have seen that, as it originally stood, it was a measure Radical, indeed, in principle, but limited in practice by the mode in which it was adjusted to the previously existing state of things, and also to a considerable extent counterbalanced by provisions of an opposite tendency. During its progress through the House the checks which limited the principle of household franchise had been all but destroyed by the incorporation into the measure of Hodgkinson's amendment, and the counterpoising anti-popular provisions had almost totally disappeared. The Government had assented to all these successive modifications, and now presented to the House for its third reading what was unquestionably a thoroughly democratic measure. The debate was opened by Lord Cranbourne (now Marquis of Salisbury), who, you will bear in mind, had resigned office rather than assist in bringing in a Radical Reform Bill. He commenced as follows: "I see with enormous astonishment that the passing of this Bill is spoken of as a Conservative triumph. . . . I wish to know whether this Bill, as is generally supposed, is exclusively the offspring of the Government, or whether the right hon. gentleman the member for South Lancashire (Mr. Gladstone) has not had something to do with it. If he has, it follows as an indisputable axiom that it cannot be a Conservative triumph. Now I heard the demands which the right hon. gentleman the member for South Lancashire made on the second reading of the Bill. Most of the members on this side of the House who heard the speech made by the right hon. gentleman on that occasion thought that it was imperious in its tone, and I do not deny that there was a stringency in the language employed which could only have been justified by the character of those to whom it was addressed. Imperious language can only be justified by the obsequiousness with which it is obeyed. Now I have sketched lightly the demands made on that occasion by the right hon. gentleman. They are ten in number. First, he demanded the lodger franchise. Well, the lodger franchise has been given. Secondly—and this is the only doubtful one—provisions to prevent traffic in votes. Such provisions, however, are to be contained in another Bill. The right hon. gentleman next

demanded the abolition of obnoxious distinctions between compounders and non-compounders. Not only have these obnoxious distinctions been abolished, but all distinctions whatever have disappeared. The fourth demand of the right hon. gentleman was that the taxing franchise should be omitted. It has been omitted. Fifthly, that the dual vote should be omitted. It has been omitted. Sixthly, that the re-distribution of seats must be considerably enlarged. It has been enlarged full 50 per cent. Seventhly, that the county franchise must be reduced. It has been reduced to something like the point at which it stood in the proposal of last year. Eighthly, that the voting papers must be omitted. To my extreme regret, the voting papers have been omitted. The last two demands were that the educational and savings banks franchises should be omitted. These two franchises have been omitted. (A cry of "Question.") Why, what, sir, is the question but this? Remember that the history of this Bill is quite peculiar. I venture to say that there is no man in this House of Commons who can remember any Bill being treated in the way that this Bill has been dealt with. No man in this House of Commons can remember a Government who have introduced a Bill of this importance, and who have yielded in committee amendments so vitally altering the whole constitution and principle of the Bill as has been done in the present instance. I think, therefore, it is but fair on the third reading of this Bill, when it appears before us for the last time in a full House, that we should be allowed to trace the changes to their sources that have been made in it. I venture to impress this upon the House, because I have heard it said that this Bill is a Conservative triumph. If it be a Conservative triumph to have adopted the principles of your most determined adversary—the hon. member for Birmingham (Mr. Bright); if it be a Conservative triumph to have introduced a Bill guarded with precautions and securities, and to have abandoned every one of those precautions and securities at the bidding of your opponents, then in the whole course of your annals, I will venture to say, the Conservative party has won no triumph so signal as this. . . . I think that when the historian of the future comes to review what has passed in the last fifteen years, he will say that a more remarkable exhibition has never been witnessed on the part of public men. The campaign which we are now concluding, the battle which you (the Opposition) have now won, was begun in the year 1852, when Lord Derby declared himself the bulwark against the advance of democracy. From that time forward his party took their tone on all occasions from their leader's declaration. It was the natural attitude which they should assume, the consistent course which they should pursue on every occasion, that they should struggle to resist any further encroachments upon the limits prescribed by the Act of 1832. In the year 1859, after resisting time after time the proposals of the hon. member for Leeds (Mr. Baines) and other hon. members, they brought forward a Bill with the avowed intention of withstanding any further inroad upon the borough constituency. In the year 1860 they strenuously opposed the proposal of Lord Palmerston to the same effect. And so it went

on : and this is the end of it—this is the ignominious conclusion—that Lord Derby's Government, the Tory Government, the Government of those statesmen who prompted and encouraged that steadfast resistance, should in the end have proposed a change far more sweeping than any man had before submitted to the House of Commons. Of all the strange and mysterious marvels which we have seen in the course of the present Session, the one which has been to me the most strange is that the right hon. gentleman the Chancellor of the Exchequer should have in this House and elsewhere denied that he and his party have changed their opinions. Why, sir, when I remember last year. . . . when I remember what we all consulted together about last year, what we all desired to do, what we were urged to do by our leaders, what was the watchword between man and man, and when we all met together what was the common object which we all agreed in promoting, I am surprised that, after so short an interval of time has elapsed, they venture to say that they have not changed their opinions. I can only say that I was closely acquainted with the movements of last year, and I heard all the exhortations which were addressed to us . . . and when such a statement is made I feel bound, in my own defence, to relieve myself of seeming factiousness by making this statement, that never, from the beginning to the end of the campaign, was a word hinted that could lead us to believe that Lord Derby and the Conservative leaders would have brought in a measure more extreme in the way of enfranchisement than the right hon. gentleman the member for South Lancashire (Mr. Gladstone). If, as he seems sometimes to have intimated, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had any such scheme in his breast, I can only say that he covered it with an impenetrable veil—with a silence that was undoubtedly most judicious, because if the least hint had escaped him of what he intended to do, he never would have gained on the 18th of June that majority which placed him in power. . . . After all, our theory of government is not that a certain number of statesmen should place themselves in office and do whatever the House of Commons bids them. Our theory of government is that on each side of the House there should be men supporting definite opinions, and that what they have supported in Opposition they should adhere to in office ; and that everyone should know, from the fact of their being in office, that these particular opinions will be supported. If you reverse that, and declare that, no matter what a man has supported in Opposition, the moment he gets into office it shall be open to him to reverse and repudiate it all, you practically destroy the whole basis on which our form of government rests, and you make the House of Commons a mere scrambling place for office. You practically banish all honourable men from the political arena, and you will find, in the long run, that the time will come when your statesmen will become nothing but political adventurers, and that professions of opinion will be looked upon as so many political manœuvres for the purpose of attaining office." The peroration of Lord Cranbourne's speech contains thoughts of great nobleness expressed in language of befitting dignity. "I entreat," he said, "hon. gentlemen opposite me not to believe that my feelings on

this subject are dictated simply by my hostility to this particular measure, though I object to it most strongly, as the House is aware. But even if I took a contrary view, if I deemed it to be most advantageous, I still should deeply regret that the position of the Executive should have been so degraded as it has been in the present Session; I should deeply regret to find that the House of Commons has applauded a policy of legerdemain; and I should above all things regret that this great gift to the people—if gift you think it—should have been purchased at the cost of a political betrayal which has no parallel in our Parliamentary annals, which strikes at the root of all that mutual confidence which is the very soul of our party government, and on which only the strength and freedom of our representative institutions can be sustained.”

Well, gentlemen, I have tried your patience by a very long quotation, but, as I hope you think, not too long an one. The Marquis of Salisbury is beyond doubt the ablest member of the present Cabinet. Within the last week he has been appointed to a post of pre-eminent importance, and the public Press has sounded his praises from one end of the country to the other. I conceive, therefore, that unusual weight ought to be attributed to his deliberately uttered opinion on the conduct of an administration whose counsels he shared, but whose tactics he was too honest to follow. What, then, were the topics on which he thought right to dwell? Why, as you have just heard, they were such as these:—obsequious submission to the demands of opponents, abandonment of solemn pledges, denial of manifest change of opinion, degradation of the House of Commons to an arena where political adventurers are to scramble for office, policy of legerdemain, political betrayal without parallel in our Parliamentary annals.

I pass over speeches made on the same night by other justly indignant Conservative members, and go straight to that of Mr. Disraeli in order that we may see what sort of reply he was able to make to the very serious charges advanced against him by Lord Cranbourne. The first of these related, you will remember, to the changes in the Bill made at the beck of Mr. Gladstone. I quote Mr. Disraeli's rejoinder verbatim:—“The noble lord the member for Stamford says that the Bill is no longer our Bill, that it has been enormously changed in consequence of our having accepted the ten conditions of the right hon. gentleman the member for South Lancashire, which he also informed the House the right hon. gentleman had so imperiously dictated. At the time there was some complaint of the imperious dictation of the right hon. gentleman, but it did not come from me.” Now, a simple reference to the debate on the second reading shows conclusively that at the time this complaint did come from Mr. Disraeli, and that he made it four times over in one and the same speech. I think it worth while to read you his four complaints, in order to make good what I have asserted. Complaint No 1.—“And then the right hon. gentleman gets up and addresses me in a tone which I must say is very unusual in this House. Not that I much care for that sort of thing, although really his manner is sometimes so very alarming that one might almost feel thankful that gentlemen in this House who sit on opposite sides of

this table are divided by a tolerably broad piece of furniture. The right hon. gentleman, addressing me in the tone and with the air of a familiar of the Inquisition, puts me to the question and says, 'This must be given up; that must be abandoned,' and so forth." Complaint No. 2.—"The right hon. gentleman yesterday made a very stern appeal to me on the subject of the lodger franchise. He said, 'The lodger franchise must be conceded.' Now I thought that was a very extraordinary tone in which to address me, who certainly, on the subject of a lodger franchise, cannot be supposed to have any very great prejudice." Complaint No. 3.—"The third menace of the right hon. gentleman was of this nature: He says the distinction between the different classes of ratepayers must be abolished." Complaint No. 4.—"I come to the fifth article of impeachment, which was couched in the same imperative and authoritative language: 'The distribution must be enlarged.'" So much for Mr. Disraeli's accuracy of statement. The reasons he alleged for withdrawing all the Conservative safe-guards of the Bill were scarcely less damaging. Listen to a few of them. "The dual vote was given up in consequence of the unanimous reprobation of that political device by the Conservative party;" that is to say, the expedient of the Government was really too bungling for even its own supporters. On the county franchise Mr. Disraeli was prepared to "vindicate" the Government proposal of £15, but a meeting of country gentlemen had passed resolutions entreating them to go below that point; inference, a casual collection of squires are likely to be better judges than Her Majesty's Conservative Government. A lodger franchise was included in the Reform Bill of Lord Derby's Government in 1859. True, but household franchise on the sacred condition of rate-paying was not the cardinal principle of that Bill, and this made all the difference. "We gave up the fancy franchises because the lodger franchise had been accepted by the House, and it was quite unnecessary to have the fancy franchises when the lodger franchise was adopted." Now this is really rather too strong. Recall for a moment the nature of the educational franchise, and ask yourselves whether graduates of Universities, ministers of religion, barristers, and medical men are the kind of people who generally live in lodgings. If they do not, Mr. Disraeli's attempt at an answer is nothing better than a mere evasion. Now listen to his apology for the indiscriminate reduction of the borough franchise. He said the Government felt it would be dangerous and invidious by a moderate reduction of the borough franchise to admit to the suffrage only "a certain and favoured portion of the working classes," and "thought it better to appeal to the sympathies of the great body of the people." Only the year before Mr. Disraeli expressed a diametrically opposite opinion, which I have already had occasion to quote. "Though impartial and intelligent people are desirous that the choicest members of the working classes should form a part, and no unimportant portion, of the estate of the Commons, they recoil from and reject a gross and indiscriminate reduction of the franchise." What was the wish of "impartial and intelligent people" in 1866 was "dangerous and invidious" in 1867;

what they "recoiled from and rejected" a year ago the Government now "thought it better to adopt." On the top of this comes Mr. Disraeli's *ne plus ultra* of hardy assertion—his denial that the Government measure had quitted the lines of Conservative policy. "I contend," he said, "that the Bill, though adapted of course to the requirements of the year in which we are legislating, is at the same time in harmony with the general policy which we have always maintained. I do think the Bill embodies the chief principles of the policy that we have professed, and which we have always advocated." I have already provided some materials by which you can form an opinion on this point for yourselves, and need not, therefore, trouble you here with a refutation of this specimen of what I may call "Westminster assurance." The best thing we can do is to receive it as Her Majesty's Opposition in the House of Commons did—with "laughter and cries of oh, oh."

I do not propose to follow the fortunes of the Bill beyond this point, but want you to consider what was the tendency of the tactics pursued throughout this campaign by the Tory leader, and acquiesced in by the Tory party. I think that tendency was to degrade English politics by sacrificing to the desire of retaining office considerations which no really high-minded statesman would have ever thought of sacrificing. Let me try to make this out. What was the string of Resolutions introduced at the opening of the campaign but an attempt—a hardly disguised attempt—to evade Ministerial responsibility, by thrusting on Parliament the task of constructing a policy, in order that the Cabinet might hang on behind, instead of getting up in front and taking the reins into their own hands, as it was their duty, and ought to have been their pride and their happiness to have done. A great body like the House of Commons is excellent for deliberation, but utterly unfit for initiation; and any attempt it might make in this latter direction would inevitably result in a general lowering of its reputation and public credit. Mr. Disraeli was prepared to purchase continuance in power at the cost of impairing the credit of the House of Commons. Fortunately Parliament at once recognised the character of the transaction, and perceived that it was their reputation, and not that of the Cabinet, which would have to pay the piper when the dance was over. They said in effect to the Government, "You may do what you like with your own money, but you shall not put your hands into our pockets, and make ducks and drakes of ours. We will not have you come angling for a policy here. This is the place to cook the fish, not to catch it; so be good enough to bring us one, and then we'll see about getting it ready for table." The chaotic disorder to which this attitude of the House of Commons instantly reduced the plans of the Government says very little for the amount of statesmanship at their disposal. When they put forward a scheme depending, to so precarious an extent, on the presumed subserviency of the House of Commons, the Cabinet was bound, in common prudence, to have had a second thoroughly digested proposal in reserve, ready to be brought up in the event of the failure of the first. Now, what was the position of the mouthpiece of the Government in the House of Commons after the

compulsory withdrawal of the Reform Resolutions? He had, as we saw, already sketched out the leading provisions of a Bill, which, on the passing of the Resolutions, it would devolve on the Government to introduce. Thus far it seemed as if the Cabinet had duly prepared itself with a stout second string to its bow. This turned out, however, to be even less substantial than its predecessor. Mr. Disraeli had had the incredible temerity to explain to Parliament a proposal which had not received the definitive sanction of the Cabinet, and by which it was not prepared to stand. Up to the withdrawal of the Resolutions, according to the admission of the Premier himself, the Government had not "actually framed a Bill," but had had under their consideration two schemes "varying from each other in that very essential particular—the amount of the extension of the franchise." In other words, they had not settled the cardinal point on which everything else hung. Directly the refusal of the House of Commons to go into the Reform Resolutions brought the Government face to face with the definite realities of a Bill, irreconcilable differences of opinion broke out in the Cabinet, and it was resolved to proceed no further with the measure explained to the House of Commons, but to bring in an entirely new Bill, which was of such a character that three principal Secretaries of State preferred to resign their posts rather than give it their support. Accordingly Mr. Disraeli had to submit to the mortification of dismissing the "sincere Bill" which he said the Government were prepared to carry, but which, from the short duration of its existence, had received the nickname of the "Five Minutes Bill," to rejoin its forerunners the discarded Resolutions. A worse specimen of Ministerial incapacity than this whole transaction it would, I believe, be hard to find in our political history.

I have pointed out the mode in which, on introducing the Household Suffrage Bill, Mr. Disraeli constructed what, for rhetorical purposes, might appear like a solid Parliamentary basis for its support. We saw that, in order to effect that construction, he first arbitrarily selected one of two contradictory decisions of the House of Commons arrived at by the most inconclusively small majorities, and attributed to it a character of authority and even of infallibility. Next, he adroitly manipulated the substance of the decision as to make it appear to fix on rating as the condition of exercising the franchise, when in reality it only decided that rating should form the basis of value estimations in reference to the franchise—an entirely different thing. I cannot suppose that so obvious a distinction as this was not perfectly clear to the mind of Mr. Disraeli, and can therefore only regard this mode of dealing with a recent Parliamentary decision as a specimen of that policy of legerdemain attributed to him by his former and present colleague, the Marquis of Salisbury. "You are quite sure, gentlemen," says the Wizard of Westminster, "that the card which I hold in my hand is the King of Hearts which you saw me draw out of your own pack? You feel certain you are right? I breathe for one moment on the card, and you discover your mistake; it is, you perceive, the Knave of Spades!" This kind of trick is delightful to witness at the Egyptian

Hall, but appears less appropriate when it is exhibited to the House of Commons from the Treasury Bench.

In proposing household suffrage Mr. Disraeli completely subverted the established Tory policy, which, as we saw, was opposed to any considerable lowering of the borough franchise. He abandoned the line which he had for years both adopted himself and urged his followers to adopt, in order to have recourse to a measure of enfranchisement much more extreme than that which, when proposed in the previous year by his political opponents, he had violently resisted. Now in what light ought we to regard this sudden change—nay, reversal—of policy? It is, we must all feel, of great importance that a statesman should be at liberty, without any stain on his honour, to avow and act upon a change of conviction which he believes to rest on sound and adequate grounds, even though such change may have come upon him rapidly, and the public announcement of it may take his supporters by surprise. The conduct of Sir Robert Peel in throwing over Protection and proposing Free Trade, was a case in point, and, in my judgment, was the act of a patriotic and self-sacrificing statesman. Mr. Disraeli, in his earlier days, pursued Sir Robert Peel on account of this change of policy with bitter and unceasing invectives, and we have seen that on the third reading of his Reform Bill he had in his turn to listen to similar charges of broken faith and political betrayal. Still, if his conduct in 1867 could be shown to exhibit the same indications of a genuine conscientious change of opinion as marked that of Sir Robert Peel on the Corn Law question, he would be entitled to the same favourable verdict. There is, however, a cardinal distinction which prevents the circumstances of Sir Robert Peel's case from forming a precedent for that of Mr. Disraeli. Sir Robert Peel openly avowed his change of opinion, and consequent change of policy. Mr. Disraeli denied in the most explicit terms that his policy had undergone any change whatever. I cannot refrain from quoting to you the noble passage in which the great convert to Free Trade made his frank confession to the House of Commons in 1846, and contrasting with it the words in which the Tory convert to household suffrage denied his need of any confession in 1867. "I will not withhold," said Sir Robert Peel, "the homage which is due to the progress of reason and to truth by denying that my opinions on the subject of Protection have undergone a change. Whether holding a private station or placed in a public one, I will assert the privilege of yielding to the force of argument and conviction, and acting upon the results of enlarged experience. It may be supposed that there is something humiliating in making such admissions. Sir, I feel no such humiliation. I have not so much confidence in the capacity of men to determine what is right or wrong intuitively as to make me feel abashed at admitting that I have been in error. I should feel humiliation if, having modified or changed my opinions, I declined to acknowledge the change for fear of incurring the imputation of inconsistency." "I contend," said Mr. Disraeli, "that the Bill, though adapted of course to the requirements of the year in which we are legislating, is at the same time in harmony with the general policy which we have always maintained. . . . I

do think the Bill embodies the chief principles of the policy that we have professed and which we have always advocated." If, gentlemen, you are as much convinced as I am that Mr. Disraeli's tactics involved, on the contrary, a complete abandonment of the chief principles and policy professed and advocated by himself and the Tory party, you will feel that such a denial as that just quoted fixes a great gulf between his conduct and that of Sir Robert Peel, to which some persons have sought to assimilate it. If it is once recognised that a minister, after supporting for years with vote and voice a particular line of policy, may, without loss of reputation, suddenly turn round and advocate a diametrically opposite policy, protesting all the while that he is acting in harmony with the principles which he has always professed—from the moment, I say, that such conduct as this is allowed to pass without censure, the confidence we have hitherto been justified in reposing in the declarations of policy deliberately made by our public men must be seriously impaired. It cannot, therefore, I think, be doubted that Mr. Disraeli's tactics on this occasion, acquiesced in, as they were, by the bulk of his party, tended directly towards the degradation of English politics in the direction which I have just pointed out.

Further, the campaign we have been surveying shows but little indication of that prodigious ability with which it is customary to credit Mr. Disraeli. He opened it with a huge miscalculation in taking for granted that the House of Commons would endure his angling Resolutions, and he gratuitously rendered their chance of acceptance hopeless by prematurely unearthing the details of what afterwards proved to be an unauthorised Bill. Then came the scene of confusion which followed the uncompliant action of the House of Commons—withdrawal of undiscussed Resolutions—abandonment of abortive Bill—resignation of three principal Secretaries of State—and general exhibition of chaos in the Cabinet. Then, when the new Bill had been brought in, the endless boggle about the compound householder, and lastly, in committee, the long series of breakdowns of one Conservative safeguard after another, which only ended when there were no more safeguards left to break down. This is, in brief, the history of the campaign, and it is a history of Ministerial blundering from beginning to end. The upshot of the whole matter, then, is this:—that in his conduct of the one great measure which will be attached to Mr. Disraeli's name in English history he exhibited political faithlessness and Ministerial incapacity. The leading members of the Cabinet which passed the Bill of 1867 can as little be acquitted of open tergiversation as can Mr. Disraeli himself. You heard the words in which Lord Stanley, Sir Stafford Northcote, and Mr. Gathorne Hardy pledged themselves not to assent to a course which within less than a year they did assent to. Mr. Disraeli is now Earl of Beaconsfield and Prime Minister. Those whom I have just named occupy seats in the Cabinet of England. Was his conduct—was their conduct—in 1867 such as to entitle him—to entitle them—to our confidence now?

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